

BROTHER ^{AND} LOVER

EBEN E. REXFORD

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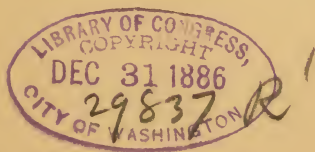




BROTHER AND LOVER:

A WOMAN'S STORY.

✓
By EBEN E. REXFORD.



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BY
JOHN B. ALDEN.

TO ALL WOMEN, NORTH AND SOUTH,
WHOSE MEMORY GOES BACK TO WAR-TIME,
THIS LITTLE VOLUME IS INSCRIBED.

BROTHER AND LOVER :

A WOMAN'S STORY.

I never shall forget the summer day
When mother died. If I but close my eyes
It all comes back to me, as, after dreams,
Remembrance of them haunts our waking
hours.

I hear the low, soft twitter of the birds
Whose nest was hidden in the cherry tree
Beside the window, as they talked about
Their little brood. I hear the summer wind
Among the flowers in the garden beds,—
Sweet-smelling pinks, old-fashioned mari-
golds,

And lilies, each a cup at early morn,
Brimmed with cool dew for sunshine-elves
to drink,

And after that a cradle for the bee,
Rocked by the wind. And I can hear the
song

Of mowers in the valley, and the ring
Of sharpening scythes, and see the fragrant
grass

Tremble and fall in long and billowy
 swaths,
As if green waves from some advancing tide
Broke at the mower's feet; and I can see
The meadows over which swift shadows pass,
As clouds go by between it and the sky,
And fancy it a sea whene'er the wind
Blows over it, and crinkling billows run
From isles of shade to golden shores of sun :
And one white mullein seems the filling sail
Of a fair shallop on this summer sea,
Freighted with fancies from some far
 Cathay,
Where dreams are gathered as we gather
 flowers
In idle mood, scarce knowing what we do.

It all comes back to me like yesterday,—
That summer hour, across whose sunshine
 fell
The lonesome shadow of an unmade grave.

In those long days, when sense of coming loss
Hung like a cloud between me and the world,
And seemed to shut me in, a prisoner there,
Away from those who had no care to vex—
No grief to bear—I used to sit and think

Of what must be.—I saw dear mother's face
Grow thinner, paler, like a sail that fades
In the gray distance, and I knew full well
That she was drifting out upon the tide
That sets toward the Infinite Sea, and soon
Where her dear face made sunshine in the
room

The shadow of dread Azrael's wing would
fall.

Where was the Heaven she was going to ?
So far away that she could no more see
The children she had loved and left behind ?
When trouble came to us, could her warm
heart—

No less a mother's heart in Heaven than it
had been

A mother's heart on earth—know of it all,
And understand our sorrows as of old ?
What Heaven was I hardly understood,
For childhood's thoughts are vague ones at
the best

About the mysteries of life and death ;
But I was sure that Heaven would not be
The Heaven of my fancy if it shut
Our mother and her love away from us.

Mother would often talk with Rob and me
About her going from us. Never once

She spoke of it as dying, for I think
“Going away” has not so sad a sound
As “dying” has, and in that thoughtful love
Which always sought to spare her children
pain,

She chose the simple phrase in daily use
Among us when we speak of those who go
Upon a journey. If we think of them
As *gone away*, *not dead*, we do not feel
That awful sense of loss which death suggests ;

We, someway, do not feel their absence so ;
A little time of parting from our friends—
A parting all must know—and then
To be with them again. Sometime, somewhere,

The sundered paths will meet, and love will
have

Its own again,—its own forevermore.

But if we think of them as *dead*, we seem
To stand upon the brink of a great gulf
Too wide for us to cross, and feel that they
Are separated from us by a sea
That breaks upon a shore of mystery,
And they are lost to us. At least to me
It always brings such dreary fancies up
To speak of death, or absent friends as dead.
So, when our mother talked with Rob and me

About her going from us, I would feel
That after she was gone, 'twould be as if
Her feet had climbed a long, steep hill, and
 she
Was on the other side, just out of sight,
But never far away. The thought was sweet
With comfort for a childish heart like mine,
Perplexed by thoughts of what I felt must
 be,
The mystery that I could not comprehend.

Years have gone by since then, but to this
 day
I always think of mother and of Rob
As on the hill's far side. When I have
 climbed
The pathway to the summit, I shall see
The dear ones I have loved and missed so
 much,
For just beyond the hilltop it is Heaven.

It was at sunset when she went away.
The robin sang, high in the cherry tree,
A little vesper song; sang soft and low,
As if he feared the silver sound might break
The spell of peace that rested on the world.

We heard the drowsy tinkling of the bells
Of cattle coming homeward down the hill,
And pleasant sights and sounds were every-
where
About us and above us.

All at once

She called us, and we went to her. She put
The mother-arms about us, folding close
Her children to the mother-heart once more,
And kissed us many times, while whisper-
ing o'er

The tender names her love had given us,—
The dear pet names that never sound so sweet
As when a mother speaks them to the child
Upon her breast,—between each one a kiss.

“Dear little Ruth and Robbie,” mother said,
“At last the time has come when I must go
Upon the journey I have told you of.”
And then she held us closer to her heart
As if to ward away the unseen hands
That sought to part us.

“But, when I am gone,
In times of trouble,—and such times will
come,—

When you would talk to some one who can
give
The sympathy you need, come to my grave.

And there above the grass that covers me,
Tell mother all about it,—she will hear;
Remember that, my children,—I shall know.
Oh Ruth, dear little Ruth, be very kind
To Brother Rob, for he'll have no one else
To look to for the love that he will need
When I am gone. I leave him in your care,
And henceforth you must be to him, my
child,
Mother as well as sister."

Then she kissed
My eyes, and called me "mother's own
good girl."

—I love to think of that.—

A little silence fell
While I cried softly on her breast, and Rob
Was still, awed by the mystery in the air,
His eyes full of vague wonderment as he
Looked up in mother's face. The sunset lit
The room with sudden splendor, and I
thought,—

Strange how such thoughts will come at
such a time,—

Of something in the Bible I had heard
My mother read: The Revelator's tale
Of what he saw in visions, when the gates
Of Heaven were opened. And I wondered
then

If the great gates had not been swung apart,
And sunset's sudden glory was a glimpse
Of what the poet-prophet saw. The hills
Were crested all with fire, and every tree
Seemed to have changed its leaves of green
for gold.

The branches of the cherry at the pane
Kept tap, tap, tapping, as if unseen hands
Were there, and I remember wondering
If messengers from God's white city stood
Outside the window, waiting to come in.

The glory of the sunset died away,
And shades of twilight filled the silent room.
I thought that mother slept, but suddenly
She stirred and spoke my name. I put my
face

Close to her own, for answer, in the dusk.

"And Robbie, is he here?"—I laid his head
Upon her breast. She kissed him many times.

"Be good to him, my little Ruth," she said;
"Be good to him,—be mother's own good
girl.

God bless you both and have you in His care
Forever—ever—"

Then her voice was still,
And I was sure that mother slept again.

Mysterious sleep—from which none ever
wake
To tell us what they dream of, if they dream.

The robin by his nest sang all at once
A little strain that trembled through the
dusk

In sounds that were like ripples on a pool—
Fainter and fainter as the circles grow,
Until they touch the shores. So softly died
The ripple of the robin's song away
Upon the shore of silence.

Who shall say
He did not hear some echo of the song
The angels sang when mother went away,
And sang because the music was so sweet
That he could not be silent? Ah, who knows?

From that strange slumber mother did not
wake. [away,"
They told us she was dead,—said "Come
And covered her white face.—

I could not stay
Where faces were so curious, though so kind
And full of sympathy for us, and so
With Robbie's hand in mine I went away
Where none but him and God would see
my grief.

“Gone—gone away” seemed whispered by
the wind,
As if it told the night about our loss,
To stir its heart with tenderness for those
Whose dearest, truest friend had gone from
them
On the long journey all must sometime take.
The darkness seemed to fold us to its breast
As if in pity for our loneliness ;
It seemed to me as if our mother's love
Pervaded all things in the silent night,
As fragrance from a flower fills the air.
You may not see the flower, and yet you feel
Its presence by its sweetness. So it seemed
That all about us, earth, and air, and sky,
Was eloquent of mother and the love
That is as strong and steadfast as the sea,
And most like God's.

Next day they let me in
To mother's room. They fancied I would be

Afraid of the still form from which the soul
Had flown away, as the long-captive bird
Flies from the cage behind whose prison bars
So long its home has been, when some kind
 hand
Sets wide the door.

 I bade them go away
And leave me with my dead. Afraid? Not I.
What was there I should fear?

 They shut the door
And left me with the mystery of death.

Filled with an awe that was akin to fear,
I lifted the white cloth that hid her face.

Was *that* my mother? Had I ever kissed
These lips of marble, upon which the seal
Of an eternal silence seemed to be?
The dead face wore that awful, sphinx-like
 look

Which gives such dignity to death. It
 seemed

As if behind the frozen mask was hid
All wisdom, and the secret no one knows
Until he learns it from the lips of God,
In that supremest moment when the soul

Puts off the garments it has worn, and stands
Naked before its maker.

Long I stood
And looked on that white face.

At last I felt
A crushing sense of isolation creep
Upon me, for it seemed as if no more
Would mother comprehend the things of
earth.

Remembrance of it must be blotted out
In the great transformation death had made.

I hid my face—I could no longer look
Upon the form before me, and I wept
In heart-sick, hopeless sorrow.

By and by
I heard a step, and thought to run away
To hide my grief. But as the steps drew near,
I knew who came, and checked my sudden
flight.

The door was opened softly, and John Earle
Looked in. Upon his thoughtful face I saw
An earnest look that touched me like a word
That goes straight to the heart because it
 means
So much.

He saw me standing in the gloom,
And came and stood beside me.
 “See,” he said,
“I brought some pansies,” and held out his
 hands
Full of the flowers most like human things
Of any flowers that grow. “I brought them,
 Ruth,
Because I knew she loved them.”

 That was all,
But it was quite enough. He understood
My sorrow's sacredness. Such sympathy
Is sweet as rain is in the time of drought
To parched and thirsty meadows. It was told
In language wordless, but more eloquent
Than any words can be.

 I took his flowers—
Purple and azure, with such golden hearts
It seemed as if they had condensed the
 warmth
And brightness of the June in them, and
 put

Some in my mother's hand, some on her
breast.

They seemed to take away the far-off look
The marble face had worn, and make it more
Like mother's face to me.

He turned away
In silence, with grave eyes; and I went out
With him, and shut the door upon the dead.

Next day they buried mother on the hill,
Where father's grave was, underneath a tree
Where birds built nests and sang their
summer songs

As if they had no thoughts of death or loss,—
No sorrow such as comes to human hearts,
Sooner or later.

Up the hillside road
We followed her whom kind hands bore
away

From the old home. We might go *after* her,
Not *with* her, as of old, to the grave's brink:
But there our feet must pause; we might not
pass

The boundary of this world. We must await
God's own good time before we entered in
To know the mystery of that Other World
Which lies so close to this,—a sod between
The Here and the Hereafter.

As we went,
John walked with us, with Robbie's hand
in his ;

And when they let the coffin down, I saw
That he had coaxed the boy to look away
From the sad sight made by a closing grave.
Such a kind, thoughtful heart was his that he
Would always seek to keep from other eyes
The sad sights of this life.

When the last sod
Was heaped o'er mother's face, I turned
away

With Robbie from the spot, and we went
down

The old path to the river, where the trees
Would hide from sight the new grave on
the hill.

I dropped down in the grass and hid my face,
And sobbed out "Mother—mother."

Did she hear ?
Or was her heart so filled with solemn awe
Of Heaven's ineffable glory and of God
There was no room, just then, for thought
of me ?

"Won't mother come back to us any more ?"
Asked Robbie, creeping closer to my side.

“How can she ?” was my answer. For my
grief
Was like a cloud that stretched across the
sky,
Hiding the sunshine of a childish faith
In what the mother I had lost had taught
Me to believe.

“But don’t you know she said
That we could tell her things? If she has gone
’Way off, and won’t come back, we can’t do
that.”

“I know she told us so,” I answered him ;
“But oh !” —the world-old cry of sorrow,—
“she
Has gone out of our life.” And then I dropped
My tear-wet face down in the grass that
seemed
To listen with a silent sympathy,
And leaned to touch my cheek with fingers
kind,
As if it knew the comfort a caress
Can give to grieving hearts.

“Then, Ruth,” a voice
Said close beside us, grave and gentle-toned,
—John’s voice—“you must not think there’s
no one left

To love you, now your mother's gone away,
For, Ruth, *I* love you."

"Yes," I made reply,
"But not as she did."

"That is true," he said ;
"No other love is like a mother's love,
And yet there may be love as strong and
true.

You'll let me love you as your brother does,
Won't you, dear Ruth ?"

"Yes, if you will," I said ;
"But all the love I ever have to give
Shall go to Rob. I'll keep it all for him."

Then Robbie looked at me with wondering
eyes,

And asked, "Won't you love Johnny, Sis-
ter Ruth ?

I love him, lots and lots."

"I'll be his *friend*,"

I said, "one of his best and truest friends ;
But mother would not like to have me share
The love I promised I would give to you
Between you and another. All for you,
For you, dear Robbie, will I keep my love,
But John shall stand next to you,—as a
friend."

In those long days of loneliness and loss,
John's friendship was the staff on which I
 leant.

He understood me as no other did.
He often came to talk with me of her
Whose feet had crossed the threshold of the
 world

Invisible to us, and when he spoke
Of her as out of sight, yet near—so near—
And knowing, as of old, our needs of her,
His words were very sweet to listen to.

“She comes to you in other than old ways,”
He said to me. “She tells you in a flower
That she remembers; and you dream of her,
And think that she is near you. Who shall
 say

’Tis nothing but a dream? I always see
Her face in pansy blossoms, for you know
She loved the pansy best of any flower.
My mother loved no other flower so well
As lilacs; and each year at lilac-time
I feel a strange, deep gladness, for it seems
As if my mother had come back to me
In the sweet blossoms. I have sometimes
 thought
It may be that the flower we love the best

When we are here on earth, becomes, when
we

Are dead, the messenger of tender thoughts
To those we left behind us, and we tell
In bloom and fragrance, messages of love
That Heaven makes sweeter. So, in lilac-
time,

I whisper to the blossoms, and it seems
As if they understood me. When a breath
Of fragrance comes, at morning or at night,
To greet me from the lilacs at the door,
I think, 'She has a loving thought for me,'
And I am glad—so glad."

His eyes were bright
With pleasure at the fancy.

"I shall try
To think my mother comes to me like that,"
I said. And when, next morning, I went up
To sit by the new grave beneath the elm,
I found a bunch of pansies blossoming there,
And knew well where they came from. Every
flower

Seemed beckoning me, as if in eagerness
To tell me something. I knelt down beside
The grave o'er which the summer's gentle
hand

Had spread a coverlet of green, whereon
The June's deft fingers wrought a broidery

Of fairy-fine conceit, and kissed each flower
As if I kissed my mother's face. It seemed
—Perhaps it was but fancy, or the wind,
Maybe, among the branches of the elm—
As if some voice in whisper spoke my name,
And, to my ear, it sounded like *her* voice,
Far-off, as out of Heaven. And I was glad.
Our fancies, though we know them to be
such,
Make little spots of beauty in our lives;
And God be thanked that fancies come,
say I,
To cheer us all along the road of life.

It seems to me, whenever I look back
To childhood, that the years that lie between
The cradle and the time when we are grown
To man's and woman's estate, are like a
dream.

It is like drifting down a sunny river,
From morning to the noontide, past the
shores
That slip away behind our little boat
Unnoticed, unregretted. Not a cloud
Of care to blot the sunshine as we look
Ahead, but never back, with eager eyes,
Imagining that the hills whose peaks we see

Beyond us, and far off, are fairer far
Than those receding from us, as we drift
All dreamily down the windening stream of
time.

Before we are aware the morn is past—
Has vanished like the rose of yesterday,—
And we have reached the hills that seemed
far off

A little time ago. No dreaming for us now.
“Dreams are for childhood and old age,”
we say.

It is for us to do the work of life
As best we may, and with brave, hopeful
hearts

We look about us, eager to begin.

Alas, how many weary in the strife,
And long to have it over, and lie down
Beneath the shelter of the grass to rest.

So from our dream of childhood Rob and I
Woke suddenly, one day, to find that we
Were man and woman.

“Do—you comprehend
The mighty meaning in that little word,
A man,” I asked. “God grant that you
may be

A man in deed and thought as well as name.”
“God helping me, I will,” he said, and put
His loving arms about me with a kiss,
As if to set the seal of love upon
The promise he had made.

No one can know
How much I loved my brother. Upon him
I lavished the affections of my heart,
Giving him all, and keeping nothing back.
With him to love, I felt no need of friends,
And so my friends were few. Now, looking
back

Along the stream on which we drifted down
To manhood and to womanhood, one face,
And only one, looks out of memory,
Beside Rob's face, and that one is John
Earle's.

It brightens and blends in with all my
thoughts

Of childhood's time, as oft a memory
Of melody heard on some happy day
Comes back to haunt us in some after year.
Always, when Robbie was away from me,
He was with John; two boon companions,
they;

I often felt a pang of jealousy :

When Rob would come from some long talk
with John,
Or row upon the river, or some tramp
Among the woods and hills, because he spoke
Such eager and enthusiastic words of him.
I could not bear the thought that Robbie
cared

For any one but me. I cannot tell
Why I was selfish as I was, or why
I so ignored all others for his sake
In such a selfish fashion. It was not
Because he wished to have it so, for he
Had many friends, and friendship for them
all.

And I knew, too, he would have liked it well
If I had given to each one a share
Of the affection kept for him alone.
As I look back, to-day, I see wherein
I erred in keeping all my love for him.
God does not mean that we should give to one
The whole, when others justly claim a share.
The friendship of the human heart belongs
To many, not to few. The meadow rose
May have one bee it cares for most of all,
And therefore keep its sweetest sweets for
him,
Because of that it should not close its cup
To every other one.

Sometimes, the thought
That some day there would come a change
 would cross
My heart like a dark shadow. It might be
A fairer face than mine would come between
Me and the brother that I loved so well,
And weave its spell about him, and would
 claim
Part of the love I wanted wholly mine.

Something of this I said to him one day,
In laughing way, my arms about his neck ;
My words were lightly spoken, but I meant
Them all, and more.

“ Afraid of losing me ? ”

He laughed, and kissed the dimple on my
 cheek—

His “ kissing-spot ” he called it—(To this
 day

I let none kiss me there, because it seems
His, and his only.) “ Do not worry, Ruth;
No one shall come between us.”

 Brother mine,
Over the hill upon the Heaven-side,
Nothing *has* come between us, and I know
That nothing ever can. Thank God for that.
The only difference that the years have made

Is, that he who was mine on earth is now
Mine in the world of God.

One day when Rob stood with me on the
porch

Beneath the brier roses, where the bees
Were humming slumbrous music as they
sucked

The nectar from the fragile, fragrant cups
That seemed o'erflowing with the sun's rare
wine,

He put his arms about my neck and said :

“You've often talked to me as if you feared
Some one would steal away my love for you;
As if they could,” and then he bent to kiss
My face in boyish fashion. “Now I think
I am the one who should be most afraid,
Because,”—and then he took my face
between

His hands, and looked into my eyes,—
“because

I know of some one whom I count as friend
Who'd like, I think, to rob me of my Ruth.”

I felt a wave of color rise and break
Across my cheek. I knew full well he meant

That John, his friend and mine, had showed
to him
His heart, in some unguarded hour, and
there
Rob read the story of a love untold,
As yet, in words.

A woman often feels
The coming of a love before she hears
Its footsteps on the threshold of her soul,
And, standing there, timid yet bold, it
knocks
For entrance at the portals of her heart,
As those who sit in silent thought alone
Will feel a presence that they have not seen
Or heard, and lift their eyes to meet the
glance
Of some one standing near.

Though to myself
I had not said, in just so many words,
That John Earle was my lover, I had felt
His friendship had a tenderer quality
Than ordinary friendships have. No word
Of his had ever told as much to me,
And yet, I knew it. I could feel the truth.
I felt, as any woman will, a thrill
Of pleasure at the thought of being loved

In such a way. When her first lover comes,
A woman's heart is like a bud that feels
The sunshine on its folded leaves—a stir
Of new, strange gladness in its hidden
depths,—

And then some burst into a sudden bloom
And yield their fragrance to the subtle
power

That opens the waiting flower; but I said,
“I have no love to give him in return;
It all belongs to Rob.” So I would keep
My heart shut 'gainst the warmth of love's
sweet sun.

“We will be friends,” I said, “the best of
friends,

But nothing more, for fate has willed it so.”

The nation's time of trial was at hand.
We heard, far off, the mutterings of a storm,
And in the Southern heavens we beheld
A cloud of threatening blackness gathering
Along the horizon, and all men felt
Forebodings of the evil days to come..

One April afternoon I leaned across
The window-sill to watch the world grow
green,

While I was waiting for Rob's coming home,
And wondering why it was he staid so long.
At last he came, and ere he reached the gate
I noted an excitement in his face, —
A pale stern look whose strangeness fright-
ened me.

“Something has happened to him,” was my
thought,

And I ran out to meet him anxiously.

“What is it, Rob?” I cried. “How pale you
are!

I never saw you look like this before.”

He took my hand in his, and from his eyes
Flashed out the story he had come to tell
In eager and impetuous words: “O, Ruth!
There's going to be war. You'll scarce
believe,

But it is true,—they've fired upon our flag
At Sumter. They have dared to do a deed
That sets the hearts of Northern men on
fire,

And we will not sit down with folded hands,
And wonder at it. We're not cowards yet!
We will not see the old flag in the dust,
Trodden by traitor feet, and make no sign.
We'll prove to them the old blood courses
yet

In Northern veins.”

I answered not a word,
But sat down on the door-step, white and
faint.

I closed my eyes. Before me swiftly passed
A vision : and I saw a lonely hill,
And on its sunny side, beneath a pine,
A low, green grave,—unmarked by any
stone,
Or aught to tell who had found slumber
there.

“What is the matter, Ruth?” my brother
asked.

“Why, you are pale as death. Ruth, are
you ill?”

“Not ill, but frightened, Rob,” was my
reply.

I saw what was to be. I'd often feared
Some fairer face than mine—some woman's
face—

Would lure my brother from me. Now I
knew

The face whose power I had dreaded so
Was the stern face of Right—our Country's
face.

I put my hand in his, and sunset fell
About us peacefully, but the old peace was
gone.

Henceforth the days would never be the same
As they had been.

We sat there, speaking not,
Till the last glow of crimson faded out
In gloom in the far west, as on the hearth
The flame dies out in ashes.

“Ruth,” he cried
At last, with flashing eyes, “*can* it be true?
I can’t help thinking of it.”

“Don’t,” I said,
And put my hand over his eyes to hide
The excitement in them. “Surely it can
make
No difference with *us*.”

Then he cried out
In eager way—I hear the brave words yet—
“Ruth, would you have your brother stay
at home
If he was needed by his Country? No!
I know you would not. You’re too brave for
that.

You would despise a coward.”

How his face
Kindled, as if the sunset lingered yet
Above the hills, and flashed its light on him,

My loyal-hearted brother, as he stood
On the home threshold over which his feet
Would soon go forth, never to make again
The music of beloved footsteps there.

“But you are all I have on earth,” I cried.
How can I let you go?” and all my heart
Was in the cry.

From other hearts than mine—
So many, many hearts in North and South—
That same sad cry went up in those dark
days,

When the land waited with abated breath
The breaking of the storm so close at hand,—
The dread simoom that strewed the hills
with graves,

And made the valleys places of the dead ;
When Sorrow sat by every hearth, and tears
Were dropping swiftly like the sands that
mark

The passing moments in the glass of time.

We heard a step. John Earle came up the
path,

And said “Good evening” to us. Silently
We made room for him on the step, and he

Sat down beside us. Ere ten words had
passed

Between us, Rob broke out about the news
From Sumter, and one glance into John's
face

Told me that he was in the mood to feel
And sympathize with Rob's excitement. I
Rose up and went away. I did not care
To listen to them, for I knew full well
What they would talk about. So I went
down

The garden path, bordered by two long rows
Of stately lilacs, growing faintly green
In the sweet weather of the April days,
And sat there, thinking, thinking, while
the sound

Of their eager voices broke upon my ears
Discordantly. The night was filled with
peace,

But not my heart. For me all peace had fled;
The shadow of a parting lay across
The way before me, and I could not see
The ending of the pathway. But I saw
Again that green hill, sloping to the sun,
And the low grave upon it, 'neath the pine.

I never shall forget the day when Rob
And John enlisted. It was in the May,

When all the world was beautiful to see.
The trees were putting on their summer dress,
And here and there, in little wayside nooks,
Pale violets bloomed, and shy wakerobins
made

Bright spots among the shadows, and the air
Was full of delicate odors, and o'erhead
The restless bluebird soared, and seemed
to be

Embodied song, that God had dowered with
wings,

And all about us larks and robins sang
In bush and treetop, in the warm, bright sun,
As if their hearts were running o'er with joy.
The bees were gathering in their early stores
From willows by the brookside, and I
watched

Them flying to their hives, with laden thighs,
All covered with the gold of pollen-dust.
Sweet sights, sweet sounds on earth and in
the air,

As if there was no sorrow, and grim war
Was something dreamed of, that could never
come

To break the peace about our little world.

I sat there sowing 'neath the cherry tree—
Sewing and thinking. Suddenly I heard

A sound like distant thunder, low and deep,
And mingled with it was another sound
That made my heart stop beating when the
wind

Blew toward me from the village. Faintly
shrill

Above the beat, beat, beating of the drums,
A strain of martial music rose and fell.

I shuddered at the sound. In it I heard
The words and tears of parting, and the sob
Of those who lingered by the hearth of home
When those they loved had gone away to
fight

The battle for their Country ; and I heard
The cry of dying men on battle fields,
Where blood ran like a river ; and I saw
The vacant places in the stricken homes ;
The widow with her children, bowed in
grief,—

The mother mourning for the son she
loved,—

The maiden widowed ere she was a wife.

The sun was low when Rob came home to me.
I heard his footsteps on the hillside road,
And went to meet him at the gate. I knew,
In one swift moment, when I saw his face,

That he was mine no longer. I could keep
My Rob no longer in the nest of home.
His wings were fledged for flight toward the
south.

“You’re going, Rob,” I cried, and reached
a hand

To draw him to me. “I can read the truth
My brother, in your eyes.”

“Yes, dear,” he said,
And put his arms about me and bent down
To kiss my cheek. “I cannot linger here
And hear my Country calling, in her hour of
need,

Vainly for help. You would not say one
word

To keep me here, if it were left to you,—
I know you would not. Better than yourself
I know the brave and loyal heart that beats
This moment in your bosom. Duty calls,
And you would be the last, dear Sister Ruth,
To bid me turn deaf ears to such a call.
I go away, but some day I’ll come back,
God willing, but if not——”

He said no more,
But lifted up my pallid face to his,
And looked into my eyes, and in that look

I read so many things! I saw how hard
It was for him to leave me, and I drove
The starting tears back to their fount again,
Resolved to bear my share of sorrow's load
As bravely as I might. I would not add
One feather-weight to make his burden
more,

By weak repining or by selfish grief.
My love for him should give me strength to
make

Myself a helper in this hour of need.

"And John is going too," he said, as we
Went up the path together, hand in hand.

"Oh, he is such a noble fellow, Ruth—
You should have heard him when he spoke
to-day.

Such ringing, earnest words. They thrill
me yet.

It was as if the very voice of Freedom spoke.
They cheered and cheered him when his
speech was done.

"I practice what I preach," he said, and
put

His name down first on the enlistment roll,
And—mine stands next—I could not help it,
Ruth.

You do not blame me—and you under-
stand?"

“Yes, Rob, dear Rob, I understand,” I said;
“I cannot blame you.” And a thrill of pride
In him, my hero, made me almost brave,
And for one moment—one—I half forgot
The sorrow and the lonesomeness of life
Without him.

Then tears came and hid his face
Away from me. I could not see the hills
For many moments.

By and by John came.
His hands were full of pansies. “See,” he
said,
“I found them on her grave and gathered
them
For you.”

I took them, thanking with a look
The kind, true heart that had such tender
thoughts
For those he loved; and some I gave to Rob,
For were they not sweet messengers of love
From mother to her children?—some for him
And some for me,—and each should have
his share.

I left them, by and by, to talk of plans
I could not listen to and hold my peace.
It seemed as if I must cry out, “No—no,”—

Beat back the threatening sorrow with fierce
hands,
And bid it not to cross the threshold stone;
Cry, "Seek some other home, but oh, spare
mine—
Spare mine and me."

And then a sense of shame
For selfish thoughts like these came over me.
What was I, more than others, that the pain
Of parting and of loss should pass me by?
I wandered down the lilac-bordered path,
And, curiously, while I thought of other
things,
I saw the blossoms nodding on the branch,
The pale, white moonlight silvering the
world,
And heard the brook's low song, as down the
hill
It ran to find the sea. Strange, is it not,
That in an hour of grief such common things
Force cognizance of themselves?

At last
John came to join me in my restless walk.
We did not speak at first, but to and fro
We paced among the lilacs. Then I thought
About his fancy of the fragrant flowers
And his dead mother's love, and broke a
branch

And put it in his hand. He understood
The thought that prompted me to give the
flower,

And smiled, and held the branch against his
face

In a caressing way. Then by and by
He reached and took my hand.

“Dear Ruth,” he said,
“There’s something I must say to you to-
night.

I love you, Ruth. Though never put in words,
I think you must have known for many a
day

The truth I tell you now. I want to take
Away with me the tender memory
Of one who waits for me, who prays for me,
Who loves me, and will be my wife when I
Come back, if that should be. Oh, may I,
Ruth ?”

The love-light kindled in my lover’s eyes,
And made me think of nights when up the
sky

I saw the silver glory of the moon
Leap from behind the hills and drive away
The darkness and the shadows, till the
world

Was like a new-created one, all pure
As if just from the great World-Maker's
hand.

"Dear John, best friend I ever had," I said,
"Save Robert and my mother, I can give
Friendship for friendship, but the love you
seek
I keep for Robbie, and for him alone."

"I ask no love like that," he said. "I want
A different love. You can love me as I
Would have you, Ruth, and love Rob none
the less."

"You cannot understand me, John," I said;
"I'm sorry for your sake, so sorry, John—
But what you ask it is not mine to give."

"I will not take an answer now," he said :
"Think over it. Before I go away
I'll ask for your decision."

"It will be
The same," I answered.

All that night I thought
Of what he said to me, and I was filled
With a strange gladness and a deep unrest.
The memory of his words made pleasant
sounds

Among my wakeful dreams, as if a song
Was tangled in my heart strings, making
there

Sweet, vibrant echoes of the music's theme,
And I would half forget all else to hear
The melody. Then suddenly the thought
Of Rob would come, and I would feel untrue
To him. And so I made myself believe
That I could never love him as I ought
And love another : In my heart was room
For one, and only one.

Oh, those last days,
When parting's shadow hung o'er every-
thing.

I felt it in the garden and the house,
And sunshine could not frighten it away.
Not all the sunshine in the world, it seemed,
Could make a brightness in the long day's
gloom.

It made the spring seem like the lonesome
days

Of fall, when all the loveliness of earth
Is passing from us. I knew well enough

When I saw Rob look into the old rooms,
And linger by the places where we played
When we were happy children, that he
thought

It might be the last time. Oh, these "last
times."—

And always, when I saw it, I would hide
Myself away from him, and in my room
Would "have my cry out," as we women
say,
Before I joined him.

The day came at last
When they must go—when good-byes must
be said.

Rob came home from the village in his suit
Of "army blue." How brave the dear boy
looked.

And then the swift tears came and blurred
my eyes,

And through the mist I saw him with a glow
Of light about his head, like aureoles
The saints wear in old pictures.

Of those hours,
My last with Rob on earth, I cannot talk,—
Their memory is too sacred.

By and by,

John Earle came in to say good-by, and ask
What answer I had to give him.

“Is it yes
Or no?” he asked. “I hope, Ruth, it is yes.”

“But it is not,” I said. “Forgive me, John,—
Oh, friend of many years, tried friend and
true !

It hurts my heart to think I give you pain
When you have asked for love.”

His eyes had been
Full of a hopeful light, but at my words
That light died out of them. I saw his lip
Quiver like a grieved child’s before he spoke.

“Well, if you cannot give the love I ask,
’Tis better I should know the truth,” he said,
“Than go on hoping when the hope at last
Must come to nought. Oh Ruth, the hope
was sweet—
So sweet.”

He paused, for tears were in his voice,
And choked him for a moment.

“But you know
Your own heart best. Oh, are you *sure*,
Ruth,
Quite sure it cannot be ?”

“Quite sure,” I said,
And made the words as tender as I could,
For pity made my heart ache for the man
Whom love made tenderer than a woman is
In any mood, save that a mother feels
When on her breast she holds the little child
God has just given her.

“Remember, John,
I’ll always count you as my dearest friend,
My one friend next to Rob. Try to forget
You ever thought of me as else than that.”

“It is not easy to forget,” he said.

“Love dies at no one’s bidding. But enough,
I’ll trouble you no more with useless talk
Of hopes and dreams that never can come
true.”

“You do not blame me, John?”

“Why should I, Ruth?
There’s nothing I can blame you for. If I
Have reared a house on unsubstantial sand
What blame belongs to others if it fall?
Blame you, indeed! No—no! But always,
Ruth,
Remember that I am your truest friend,
And come to me for proof in time of need.
Now shall we say good-by?”

I put my hand in his.
“God bless you, John,” I said in broken
words.

“For my sake, John, take care of Rob, and
bring

My brother back to me. God bless you both,
And keep you safe shall be my hourly
prayer.

Good-by—good-by.”

He bent and kissed my cheek :
“For what I hoped might be,” he said. It
was

As if a mourner should stoop down to kiss
His dead before the grave hid it from sight.
Alas, for all the hopes that fade and die
As flowers do, in the frost.

“I’ll care for Rob
For your sake and for friendship’s, never
fear ;

He is *my* brother by the kin of love
If not of blood.” And then—“Dear Ruth,
good-by

For a long time, and, it may be, forever—
God knows, not we. I leave you in His
keeping.”

And then he went away.

Ere long, Rob came.

“It’s time for me to go,” he said. “Come,
Ruth,

I’m going by the churchyard, for once more
I want to see her grave. So come with me,
There’s where we’ll say good-by.”

And hand in hand,
As we had gone so many times before
But never would again, we two went out
Through the old garden and the gate,
And up the winding hill-road, speaking not,
But each was thinking over sorrowful
thoughts

For which there is no name, and which can
find

Utterance in but one word, and that “good-
by.”

When half way up the hill he stopped and
looked,

With yearning, wistful eyes, back to the
house

That he was going from forever.

Then my heart
Forgot its bravery,—all but its grief,
And made its moan, “How can I let you
go?”

“Don’t, Ruth,” he said; and I choked down
my tears—

Or made a mighty effort to, and failed,—
And we went on together up the hill
And into the old churchyard. Mother's grave
Was purpled o'er with pansies. He knelt
down
And touched them with caressing hands,
and said,
“Dear little things! I wonder if she knows?”
And then a wind stirred all the blossoms
there,
And set them nodding, nodding “Yes, she
knows.”
“Dear Ruth, if I should die—” And then
a sob
Choked him, and for a time he could not
speak,
While in my ears kept ringing like a knell,
“If he should die.”——

At last, he spoke again :
“If I should not come back, don't think of
me
As so far off you cannot hear my voice
Or see me, but close by, as mother is,—
She told you how it was. Death cannot break
The tie that binds your heart and mine,
dear Ruth.

You may be here, I in the world of God,
But all there is between us is the sod
That covers me, so near the two worlds are,—
So near will we be to each other still.
My love will be the same it is to-day,
In Heaven or here. Remember that, dear
Ruth.”

My brother, I remember evermore !

He took me in his arms, and lovingly
Looked down into my face and said to me—
Oh sweet words to remember all these
years—
“What a true, faithful sister you have
been.”

And then—and then—

I cannot tell you more
Of those last moments, for the swift tears
rise
And blind me, till I cannot see the page,
And all the lines are blurred, as if the rain
Blew in upon the words; but through the
mist

I see my brother's face. No tears can hide
That from my loving eyes—not even the
grave.

When Rob had gone, I could not make it
seem,
For many days, as if he had not died.
That awful sense of absence and of loss
Which follows death was all about the
house.

I listened in the silence for a step
That never came—a voice I could not hear.
I saw his vacant chair, his empty room,
The clothes that he had worn, as we see
things

Belonging, once, to those we loved, but now
No longer theirs, because they have no need
Of earthly things. Then I would strive to
put

Such thoughts away, and bear with hopeful
heart

The burden of my loneliness. At night
I dreamed of Rob, and woke from dreams,
at morn,

With thoughts of him. I wondered where
he was,

And what he thought about. Of me,
perhaps,—

And all the livelong day, on tireless feet
My thoughts went tramp, tramp, tramping
after him.

At evening, I would sit and watch the stars
And think that maybe he was watching too,
And there was something pleasant in the
thought

That we could see the same things, though
apart.

It made him seem more near to fancy that.
Each night I knelt down in my little room
And prayed for the brave boy I loved so
well,—

Prayed God would keep him safe, and send
him back ;

And never once did I forget to pray
For John.

And so the lonesome days went by.
How many, many women, North and South,
Know what they were to me. They know,
because,
Like me, they waited by the hearth of home.
And oh ! how many of them wait to-day ;
But what they wait for is no more of earth.
Oh weary hearts, some day, some happy
day,

Your waiting will be over, and the touch
“Of vanished hands” will gladden you
again,
The “voices that are still” be heard once
more,
And then—oh—then—!

I tried my best to be
Brave, cheerful, patient. Often letters came,
Bright, loving letters, like a beam of light
That falls in shady places, and they made
Me stronger for the work I had to do.
If those I loved could with unfaltering
hands
And willing hearts do what the soldier must,
Could I not pray for them at home, and
wait?
That was my share of work; and if God heard
But one out of the many prayers I made
And answered it, then am I very sure
It was well done.

So two long years went by.
Then Rob's discharge came:
“Honorably discharged,”
I say to-day, with pride. Thank God for that.

It was in May that the news came to me

That he was mustered out. The earth was
like

A child that wakes up from a pleasant sleep,
All flushed and radiant with joy. The rose
Was breaking into bloom beside the gate,
Pink as the cheeks of maidens when they
hear,

With glad, down-dropping eyes and beating
hearts,

The words of love a lover has to tell ;
The gnarled, gray branches of the apple trees
Were like great arms, filled by the laugh-
ing May

With flowers to lure the bee, and freight the
air

With odors dreams are born of, and each
breeze

That blew across the orchard scattered down
A shower of white petals on the grass,

Like a belated snow-storm. In the elm

The robin's nest, just finished, could be seen,
And he was singing from a cherry bough

A roundelay of gladness to his mate,

Who by the nest was dreaming happy
dreams

Of unfledged wings. The world was glad
at heart

Because of song and sunshine, and the May.

How much, that afternoon, I thought of Rob !
He loved the blossoms and the birds so well
That I kept wishing, wishing he could know
About them. All day long he seemed to be
Close by me,—sitting with me,—watching
me

About my work as he had used to do,
And I was strangely happy. Once, indeed,
His presence seemed so real I spoke his name,
Half thinking—though the fancy made me
smile

At its own fancifulness, that I would hear
His voice in answer to me. But instead
The listening robin in the cherry tree
Broke into jubilant song, and sang until
It seemed as if his little throat must burst
With melody. Perhaps the robin knew !

I heard a boy's blithe whistle down the road,
And thought, I have remembered since, how
light

A boy's heart is, a thing of thistle-down
Tossed hither, thither, by each breeze that
blows,

Knowing no care, no longing, no regret,
Content and happy just to breathe and be.

The little lad stopped at the garden gate,

Holding a letter up for me. I ran
To get it, wondering if it was from Rob.

“A telegram,” the boy said; “it just came.
It’s from somebody in the war, they said.”
A telegram! I reached a trembling hand
To take the message, half afraid to touch
The folded paper, for too well I knew
What army telegrams had come to mean
To those who read them in their lonely
homes.

I leaned against the gate, grown dizzy, faint
With terrible foreboding, while I tore
The message open.

There I read these words :
“ROBERT WAS KILLED IN BATTLE YESTER-
DAY.”

Only six words! But those words seemed to
grow,
And grow, and grow, till all the peaceful sky
Was covered by them, and the hills were hid
Beneath their blackness as beneath a pall ;
And everything about me seemed to cry,
“Killed—killed in battle,” till the world
was full
Of that one sound, with room for nothing
more.

I did not cry out in that awful hour
With the sharp agony that rent my heart—
It seemed to make me dumb. I turned away
From round-eyed wonder in the lad's grave
face,
And groped my way back to the house like
one
Who feels her way in darkness.

All the light

Had gone out of the world, for me, with Rob.

I sat down on the threshold where his feet
Would never fall again, and laid my head
Down on the old, worn sill, and said,
“Dead—dead——”

In the white silence of the summer night
I went to mother's grave. There I knelt
down
In the tall grass, and dropped my tearless
face
Among the pansies that were blossoming
there,
All wet with dew. The touch of the dear
flowers
Was like a kiss—her kiss—upon my cheek.

“ Oh mother, do you know ? ” I cried ; and
then

I sobbed out on her grave my grief and loss:
And lying there beneath the pitying stars,
With pansy-kisses on my face, it seemed
As if she held me on her faithful breast,
And spoke to me in low and loving words
To comfort me.

And by and by it seemed
That Rob was with us, and the mother-arms
Were round us both.

A letter came to me
From one of Robbie's comrades, and it told
How he had met his death :

In the fierce charge
Rob and John Earle went forward side by
side,

The letter said, and nobly did Rob fight.

“ Fought like a hero, like a hero fell.”

Those were the very words, and there were
more

Of praise for him who was beyond all praise.

I read that letter often, and I feel

To day, as then, a strange, exultant thrill

Of pride in my dead hero, and I think
I see the battle-fire in his brave eyes,—
His stern-set lips,—the courage that would
dare

The storm of death without a thought of fear.

“Fought like a hero, like a hero fell.”

Who needs a nobler epitaph than that ?

And then the letter told me of John Earle :

“He tried to shield your brother from a blow
A rebel aimed at him. He took the sabre
stroke

On his uplifted arm,—he would have saved
Your brother’s life with his. The surgeon
says

His wound is a severe and dangerous one,
But they report that he is doing well.

He made a hero of himself that day,
And we are proud of him,—of him and Rob,
Who was a favorite, you may be glad to
know,

With every one who knew him.”

How my heart
Swelled when I read that tribute to my
dead,
So eloquent because so true.

“I saw
John Earle to-day. He bade me write to you
And tell you that he could not; and he said,

‘Tell her I *tried* to make my promise good,
And save Rob for her, but it could not be.’”

Day after day I sat down in the door
And thought it over. Henceforth I must
tread

A lonely path. And looking down the
years

It seemed so long before the end was
reached!

Long pathways are not lonesome ones when
those

We love are treading them with us; but when
The dear, familiar footsteps die away

Into the silence of the other world,

Then are they very lonely; and at times

We falter in the way, put out our hand

To grasp another hand, and in our need

Lay hold on—nothing. Then do we remem-
ber

There is no arm to lean on except God’s,

And at such times, that seems so far away

We cannot reach it.

Then my heart would turn
To John, as does the little, frightened child
Left in a strange room turn to him who shows
The kindest face, and tell him all its grief,

And trust him for the help it needs. When I
Thought of the future, Rob in Heaven
seemed far,

So very far away, and my heart ached
For loving words and a familiar face.

I wanted some one I could talk to—one
Whom I could *see*, and *hear*, and *touch*; and
John

Was all the friend I had, and he must fill
The place made vacant by my brother's
death.

In all the world—this world, not God's, for
there

I had dear friends—he was the only one
That I could turn to in my loneliness
And find the comfort that the sore heart
needs—

The balm of sympathy that friendship's
flower

Yields in abundance, healing up the wounds
That death makes when it takes the ones
we love.

Two weeks went by; and in that time I heard
No tidings from John Earle. “He may be
dead,”

I said, and waited in that sad suspense

Which tries the heart as much as grief, or
more.

“God, must I lose him, too?”

At last there came
A letter, and it told me that my friend
Was fading slowly, surely out of life;
For many days he had not known the face
Of any comrade; in delirious hours
He called for Ruth. Ruth, Ruth, was all
his thought.

“We think it best to tell you this,” they
wrote,

“For if you care to see him this side Heaven
There is no time to lose, the doctor says.
The end, perhaps, is nearer than we think;
We know it’s not far off.”

Till I read that,
And felt how near death was, I did not know
How much I loved John Earle; but then I
saw

The truth to which my love for Brother Rob
Had made me blind. The love that John
had asked

My heart would give him now, but ah! too
late

Would come the boon his steadfast heart
had craved.

Alas, too late! What need have they who go

Away from us to Heaven, of earthly love?—
The love that would have made a Heaven
here

For them and us. “Too late, too late, too
late,”

Kept ringing in my ears to torture me
With hopeless longing and with vain regret,
By the monotony of its refrain, “alas, too
late.”

No time to lose. Perhaps he would be dead
Before I reached him. “Oh, if love had
wings,
Swift wings and strong, to bear me to his
side,”

I cried, and all my thoughts went flying
south

Like birds in autumn, to my dying friend;
And but one prayer was mine—that God
would spare

His life till I could reach him.

Like a snail

The train seemed creeping on its southward
way.

“O, faster, faster, faster,” I would cry;
“He must not die before I hear him
speak

My name once more. O, shut the gates of
Heaven
Against him, God, for yet a little time."

So ran my thoughts through all the laggard
hours
Of the long day and the still longer night
That made my journey seem a lifetime long.

But all things end at last. The Sabbath
peace
That lay upon the field where death had held
Fierce revelry so short a time before,
Stole in upon my heart as I went up
The hill to the old church which they had
made
A hospital, and calmed the tumult there,
As if the voice of God said, "Peace, be still."

I met a soldier half way up the hill.
"I want to find John Earle," I cried, and
then
My heart stood still for fear of what might be
His answer to me.

"In the old church there,"

He said, and sudden joy thrilled through my
frame,
For he was living yet, and I should see
My friend once more, this side the gates of
God.

Beside the broken fence, a lilac grew,—
A poor, gnarled bush with scarcely life
enough,
It seemed, to put its scanty garments on
Each year, and yet it could not die. Perhaps
My life was symbolized by this hapless plant,
I thought, and then a little warm south wind
Blew one poor branch across my path, and lo!
A cluster of sweet flowers, born out of time !

I thought of John's old fancy of these flowers
And his dead mother's love ; and then it
seemed
As if she stood beside me, welcoming me,
And I bent down and touched the lilac
blooms
As meeting friends clasp hands, and I was
sure
His fancy was a true one, for the branch
Broke in my hand, and made it seem that she

Would have me bear the message of her love
To John.

With swiftly-beating heart I climbed
The steps, and paused beside the open door
For one brief moment, with a wordless
prayer

Upon my lips. I know not what it was,
But God did, I am sure. It matters not
What shape we put our prayers in, if He
hears.

I crossed the threshold. Peace was in the
room.

“God’s house” it seemed, as ne’er did
church before.

On either side the aisle I saw a row
Of narrow beds, and on some sick men lay,
And some, alas, were empty.

Some one came
And spoke to me. “You came to see a
friend?”

“I want John Earle,” I cried. “O, tell me
where

To find him, please.”

“I think you must be Ruth,”
The soldier said and bade me follow him.

A strange excitement thrilled me, as a wind
Makes the reed quiver, and I felt my cheek
Grow pale and paler, and breath came and
went

In gasps—for I was near to John once more—
One moment, one, and I should see his face,
And hear his voice.

Since then, I've often thought
That when my feet have found the way to
Heaven,

And I stand waiting for the jasper gates
To swing apart and let me in to God
And all the dear ones in the deathless land,
That I shall feel the same excitement there
That filled my soul in the old church that
day,

As I paused, breathless, eager, at its door.

Beyond the long aisle and the chancel's rail
One bed stood by itself.

“John Earle's,” he said,
Who led the way.

I saw a thin white face
On the rough pillow, and it made me think
Of snowdrifts fading in the April wind,
So wan it was—quite like the thistledown
That vanishes at lightest breath of air ;

And at the sight of it my feet stood still,
As they will stand when I get into Heaven,
And come before the King, adoring him.

I saw John's face once more.——

And then I saw
Another thing : where John's right arm had
been

There was no arm now, and I knew that he
Had lost it when he tried to save Rob's life.
O John, my hero!——

“I will leave you now,”
The soldier said. “He'll wake up soon, I
think.

Be quiet, ma'am; he's weaker than a child,—
Don't let him talk much.” Then he went
away,

And I knelt softly down beside the bed
And looked upon the poor, pale, patient face
Until tears came, and made me suddenly
blind.

I laid the flowers on his pillow. He
Stirred in his sleep, and presently awoke.

“I thought I smelled the lilacs. Is it spring,
And are you here, my mother?”

Oh, that voice,
So weak it was a whisper, but as sweet
In my ears as the Heavenly Song will be.

“Oh John,” I cried out softly, “*I* am here—
The Ruth you wanted. Don’t you know me,
John?”

He turned towards me in a startled way,
As if a voice spoke to him from the dead,
And then—I see it yet—the light that filled
His wistful eyes, and shone through his
white face,
And made it seem so like an angel’s that
The sight was full of a sharp agony for me.

“Ruth, Ruth—dear Ruth,” he cried, and
tried to reach
His one poor hand in welcome.

Then I dropped
My face upon it, and I covered it
With kisses, and a silence deep and sweet
Was round us many moments. Neither cared
To break it, for heart spoke to heart, and
words
Are poor, weak things in such a time as that.

“I’ve thought of you,” he told me, by and by,

“So much, dear Ruth, for I knew that you’d be

So lonely—*after that*.” And then his lip
Quivered, and the blue violets of his eyes
Were blossoms, wet with sudden summer
rain.

“I *tried* to save him, Ruth. I wonder why
My life would not have answered, just as
well?

I wish it might have been so, for your sake.”

Oh most unselfish soul! How poor, how
weak,

I felt before the man who would have died
For love’s sake, gladly. Unto me it seemed
As if the heavens opened, and I saw
The cup of the Holy Grail—a soul abrim
With wine of love like this—a soul so pure
It was a symbol of divinest things.

“I am so glad you came, so glad,” he said;
“I want to tell you many things of Rob
Before the end comes. Ah, the end!” and
then

A strange and far off look grew in his eyes
As if already he could see beyond
The lights and shadows of this lower life
Into the mystery of the life with God.

“Oh John,” I cried, and put out both my
hands
As if to hold him back from Heaven’s door,
“I cannot give you up! In all the world
I have no one but you—live, live for me!”

“It is in God’s hands, Ruth,” was his reply,
“And He knows best.”

I saw how weak he was
And bade him talk no more, but try to rest.
I stroked the brown hair backward from his
brow,
And laid my fingers on his eyes, and he
Smiled as a pleased child does, but the smile
Was such a wan and white one that it made
My heart ache when I saw it.

By and by,
His hand found mine, and holding it, he
sank

Into a quiet sleep. The doctor came
While he was sleeping. He bent down to
hear
The sick man's breathing, and to watch his
face.

-

"I think the sight of you has done him
good,"

He said, and seemed well pleased. "Perhaps
—who knows ?

It may be possible to save him yet ;
A woman's care does more than doctors can
In such a case as this, nine times in ten."
A hope sprang up, that moment, in my heart,
And flooded it with brightness as the sun
Breaks suddenly from behind a cloud, and
fills

The world with wonderful beauty. "God,"
I cried,

And lifted up my face toward the Throne
And Him who sits thereon in majesty,
"Oh spare him, spare him, spare him."

Who shall say
That God heard not my prayer and answered
it ?

I love to think so : but it may have been
Willed in the Eternal Wisdom he would live

And that he would have lived, had I not
prayed ;

But still I love to think God heard my
prayer

And answered it. I know He answers some,
And why not mine ?

When morn's first ray stole in
Along the aisle, as comes on noiseless feet
A Sister of sweet Charity, scattering gloom
By the soft radiance of her saintlike smile,
I thought John's face wore quite a different
look ;

There was a faint, vague color in the cheeks,
A hint, a memory, of the ruddy hue
That had been there before that battle-day
When he laid down his strong right arm
for Rob,

And dared all for his Country.

In his round
The doctor sat awhile, to talk with me
And nodded his gray head, in hopeful way,
At sight of John's changed face.

“I'm glad to see
That new look there,” and then he felt
The sick man's pulse. “A stronger, steadier
beat

Than yesterday. I tell you what, my boy,
There is no tonic like a friendly face.

I've seen it do what skill of mine could not
Time and again, and here's another case
Of wonder-working, if I read aright
The signs, to-day; and my poor, baffled skill
Steps back and gives the credit all to Ruth,
Where it belongs. So, Doctor Ruth, keep on,
And maybe in a month, if all goes well,
You'll have this soldier on his feet again."

The doctor's words were sweeter in my ear
Than any music I had ever heard;
Through happy tears I looked the gratitude
I could not trust myself to put in speech.

Days came and went: and as a little boat
That drifted seaward on an ebbing tide
Is shoreward blown by some land-loving
 wind,
So John's life was blown back to earth and
 me
By favoring winds of God's great mercy; and
My heart was full of happiness—so full
It seemed there was enough for all the world.

I never shall forget the summer days
I spent in that old church. To me they are
Among the best days of my life.

Ere long

We had it mostly to ourselves, for those
Who were not wounded unto death, grew
strong,

And went to join their comrades in the field;
And those whose battle-days were done,
went out

To join their comrades in the land of peace.

I stood by many a dying soldier's bed
And spoke such words of comfort as I could
In that most solemn hour. I read to them
The promises of God, and tried to show,
To eyes grown dim, the glory shining out
Through Heaven's door, across the night of
death,

To light the way that leads the wanderer
home.

I wrote for them last messages of love
To dear ones in the homes they longed to see
Before they went away. When they were
dead

I shut the lids down over sightless eyes,
And laid a blossom or a leaf between
The folded hands; and often tears would
fall

On the still faces as I thought of those
Who waited, far away, in hopeless hope,
Some tidings from the dead.

In those long days,
When o'er our little world between the hills
Peace spread its wings, making it seem to me
War must be all a dream, we talked of Rob.

“Oh Ruth, we were so proud, so proud of
him,”

John said ; “No braver soldier ever lived,
Or died, then he was. Everybody loved
The boy. If you could but have seen his face
That moment when we made the last wild
charge,

It would have thrilled you like a trumpet-
blast.

So brave—so grand ! It set my soul on fire
With courage I had never felt before.

Our standard-bearer fell, and like a flash
Rob sprang and seized the colors, and above
Our heads he waved the flag, and cried,
“Come on—

They shall not drive us back,—come on,—
come on !”

How John's eyes kindled at the memory
Of Rob's brave deed ; and I could see it all
As if it passed before me, watching him,
For his pale face would grow more eloquent
Than any words are.

“Some day we will go
To see his grave,” he said. “The last thing I
Remember, is the volley that they fired
Above it. Then the red sun seemed to fade
Until it was a spark, and then went out
In utter darkness, and I knew no more.”

One day John called me Sister Ruth.

“You’ll let

Me be your brother, now that Rob is gone.”
He said, and smiled in his grave, earnest
way ;

And then he put his hand upon my own
As if to seal the compact. Then I knew
He had no thought of ever calling me
By any dearer name. What I had said
In answer to the plea he made for love
He had set down as final. He would ask
For such a love no more, because, he thought,
She knew her own heart then, and if for me
There was no love there such as that I sought,
There is none now. She holds me as a friend,
And loves me as a brother, that is all ;
And if I can not have the thing I sought,
With what I *can* have I must be content.

Oh John ! I *did* think that I knew my heart,
When from his plea of love I turned away,

But now I knew it better. From my eyes
The blindness was dispelled, and I could see
The truth he could not. But I could not say
To him, "If you should ask of me to-day
The question that you asked me long ago,
My answer would be different." I must let
Him learn the truth some other way. And
yet,

I wonder that he read not in my face
The love that was not like a sister's love.
Ah, men are sometimes blind when they
might see!

Such men as John must always judge, I
think,

All others by themselves. Their "no" to-day
A year hence will be "no," and never "yes."
They understand themselves before they
speak,

But not all women do; we make mistakes
In our own judgment of ourselves, I know,
And only time and change bring us to see
The truth. Alas, how many times too late
The knowledge comes to set the error right.

One still October day we climbed the hill
Behind the church to find Rob's nameless
grave.

The air was full of Indian Summer haze
That softened all harsh outlines, near and
far,
Making the world of men a world of dreams,
Because it was so shadowy and so vague,
So far away from all the din and fret,
The want and work and worry of men's
lives.

We climbed the steep hill slowly. I broke
off

Some purple asters growing by the path,
And a great plume of golden-rod, to lay
Upon the grave of him who loved such
flowers

As if they were akin.

“Ruth, shut your eyes,
And I will lead you to the spot,” John said,
And trustingly I did as I was told,

And with my hand in his, he led me on
A little distance. Then he stopped, and
said,

In tender, reverent way, “Here is his
grave,”

—As I have heard some men say, “Let us
pray,”—

Then went away and left me there alone.

And on the hillside sloping to the sun,
Beneath the branches of an old pine tree
That whispered ever to the roving wind
Of something sorrowful as death—or life—
I saw, low at my feet, all covered o'er
With a snow of autumn daisies,—Robbie's
grave.

The sun was low when John came back to me.

“Is it too soon?” he asked, and came and
stood

Beside me, looking down upon the grave
With thoughtful eyes.

“I knew, dear Sister Ruth,
You'd have so much to tell him.”

“Yes,” I said,
“And I have told it,”—smiling through my
tears,

At him who stood there with his empty sleeve
Across his breast. How brave, how grand
he looked !

“If *I* were lying here, and to my grave
You came, dear Ruth, what would you have
to tell ?”

He questioned, looking gravely in my eyes.

“Oh John,” I cried, my heart upon my lips,
“I’d tell you that I loved you.”

Like a flash
Of sudden light, the meaning in my words
Broke in upon him, and with eager eyes
He scanned my face.

“Oh Ruth, what do you mean?”

“Oh, are you blind?” I cried in sweet, swift
shame,

“I told you, once, I could not give such
love

To you as that you asked for. I was wrong.
Oh, let me be right hand to you, dear
John,—

I’ll take the place of the strong arm you gave
For him whose grave is here. Oh, may I,
John?”

“Ruth, Ruth,” he cried, in voice that
trembled so

With doubtful joy, the words seemed close
to tears,

“Do you say this because you pity me?
For love’s sake only would I take the gift
You offer me.”

I looked into his face,
With honest eyes, and answered truthfully,
“Believe me, John, I say it for love’s sake.”

He answered not a word, but in his eyes
There was an eloquence that in one look
Told more than all the words a man could
 speak
In a whole lifetime.

 Then he put his arm,
His one dear arm, about me, drawing me
To him in love’s embrace ; and I could feel
The swift and happy beating of his heart,
And looking up into his earnest eyes
I seemed to see his brave soul shining
 through,
As through a rifted cloud one sees the sky
Beyond, bright with the beauty of the sun,
And oh, what joy shone on me in that look !
He kissed me, whispering softly, “ Oh my
 Ruth,
If this is earth then what must Heaven be ? ”

And overhead I heard the pine’s low voice
Telling its troubles to the wandering wind,
While in the rustling grasses at my feet

I seemed to hear a voice all jubilant
With gladness, and I think it was Rob's
voice,
And he was telling me he knew, he knew !

Ah yes, he knew, and for love's sake was
glad,
As was the bird that from its little nest
Upon his grave soared singing up the sky,
To tell the story at the gate of Heaven.

THE END.



Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process
Neutralizing agent: Magnesium Oxide
Treatment Date: Sept. 2009

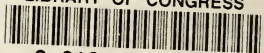
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